

## TimeWell Spent: A Day with DCFS

Written by John Elwell

Thursday, 14 October 2010 14:45

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At the request of a family member who works in DCFS northern region, I signed up as a shadow reviewer for the QCR for the Salt Lake region.

Now, I am not an unbiased observer. In addition to that family member, I am an adoptive father of a sibling pair of boys from the SLC region in 1996. That adoption was quite a process in itself, but was seen from the adoptive parent perspective. My experience a couple weeks ago as I shadowed a DCFS reviewer was quite different. And interesting. Not to mention overwhelming.

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The experience started out a bit daunting at the training session, when I learned that “the QCR looks at status and system, including caseworker, CFT, GAL, DWS, etc., and differs from CPR in important aspects”, or something to that affect. Come again? I know your jobs are stressful, but is CPR needed often?

My industry (aerospace) is renowned for jargon and acronyms. However, we don't hold a candle to you folks. And your jargon is tricky. You know when I'm using jargon because the words and phrases are not used in everyday life. Child welfare jargon, on the other hand, includes words I use every day: child, family, team, worker, service, purple books, pink sheets, etc. But hidden behind these innocent looking words are layers upon layers of meaning to which I was simply not attuned, nor even aware in many cases. I spent much of the training day and time during the QCR interviews listening carefully and trying to interpret what in the world was being discussed, and why it impacted the case. And writing a private cheat sheet in the back of my purple book.

Training day for reviewers gave me a basic familiarity with the dozen or so status and system performance indicators. The subtleties of some of the indicators were challenging: stability vs. permanence; planning process vs. supports & services vs. plan implementation. I left the training day feeling at that I could at least sit through the interviews and understand what was being discussed.

On the first review day I met Aude, the reviewer whom I would be shadowing. After orientation we spent an hour or so reading through the case material. Yeah, like I could read through a couple three-inch three-ring binders in an hour or so. You folks like to write! There were case notes, family plans, provider assessments, court documents, etc. Aude directed me to a few key documents where I learned the basics of the case: an unwed mother reported to DCFS by the paternal grandmother for driving with a one-year-old child while under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Our first interview was with the caseworker, or worker in DCFS jargon. Ryan was engaging and knowledgeable. He had obviously put a lot of effort into working with all the different parties, developing plans, and trying to get the supports in place to help this young mother resolve her substance abuse issues, learn to become a better mother, and safely bring DCFS involvement to an end. His investment in the success of the process was clear. As he talked, I kept thinking that while this man was working to help out this family with whom I was becoming familiar, he was also working with 15 or so other families at the same time. It felt overwhelming to me – if he

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was applying himself likewise to those other cases, when did he eat and sleep?

The next interviews were at the home of the family. Mom and child were there, as well as the maternal great-grandmother (a primary caregiver – there is that jargon again). The paternal grandmother later joined us. I listened to the family stories and to Aude's carefully worded and directed questions and I tried to fit the stories into the status and system indicators on which we would be grading.

Other interviews during the two review days included the mother's drug & alcohol counselor and the GAL. Calls to the AG and DWS were unanswered. We finished interviews by visiting the father at the Odyssey House. I was again very impressed with Aude. Her focus on getting what she needed to write up a QCR grading sheet and story, while putting dad at ease and letting him talk, was an education to watch.

After completing the interview with dad, we headed back to the office to grade the case. This involved several hours of discussing each status and system indicator, reviewing notes, and often discussing subtleties of indicator grading with other reviewers struggling with their cases.

The final portion of the review was sitting through the debriefings for our case, as well as a handful of others. The case I reviewed was simple compared to others at the debriefing. If it was tough keeping my head above water over the subtleties of an in-home mom & child with a supportive family, I would have been drowning in the complexities of multiple fathers, disputed paternities, delinquency, parents in & out of jail, possible termination of parental rights, etc.

Throughout the QCR, one theme showed through: what is best for the child. No one seemed to lose sight of that. A couple dozen indicators, a dozen or more people involved as caseworkers, providers, or legal representatives, and yet I heard the reviewers and caseworkers continually coming back to the central theme: what is best for the child?

So... what do I think of the experience? It was a real eye-opener for me. I was impressed with

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the caseworker's knowledge and dedication, and I can honestly say that all the DCFS personnel that I met over three days showed the same high level of professionalism in the pursuit of the best and safest outcome for the children they have been given responsibility for. Children are the most vulnerable citizens of our state, and DCFS has the heavy responsibility to protect and help those children in need. My time with DCFS has helped me understand how you accomplish that task, and gave me tremendous respect for how well you do your jobs. I want to thank all you DCFS folks for doing what you do, and doing it so well in the trying conditions in which you work.

My family member who asked me to be a shadow reviewer accomplished what she had hoped to: I am much more informed of what she does, and how DCFS system works. I would encourage all DCFS employees to ask your friends and families to make the commitment of being a shadow reviewer in the QCR process. I can't help but believe most people will come away impressed as I am with what you do, and hopefully more support in the community might make your jobs just a little bit easier. And they need to be easier – and you need to be paid more!

- John Elwell, Rocket Scientist